

# PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM OF CHRISTIANS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE FROM AD54 TO 100: A LESSON FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

*Emeka C. Ekeke*

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria

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## Abstract

Persecution and martyrdom among adherents of various religions of the world have been a critical issue. In some religions it is honored and given a prominent place and the martyrs seen as having gone to paradise. In others they go as far as killing themselves in their bid to be seen as martyrs and inherit a place of prominent in the world to come. This study examined persecutions and martyrdom among Christians in the Roman Empire between AD 54 and AD100. It traces the history of persecution of Christians from the time of Emperor Nero to Domitian. The paper also traces brief biography of some emperors and their achievements within the period. The paper concludes with a lesson for the 21<sup>st</sup> century church. It recommends among others that Christians today should return to the kind of dogged faith that characterized the early Christians that made them grow in number and in strength. They should not resort to retaliation as has been the case in many instances but to turn vengeance to God if they are to be seen and known as Christians indeed.

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**Keywords:** Persecution of Christians, Christian martyrdom, Roman Emperors

## Introduction

The Roman Empire was generally quite tolerant in its treatment of other religions. The gods worshipped by the Romans were the powers upon which they believed that the different parts of life depended: family ancestors, guardian gods of house, street, town, trade and crops. Because its imperial policy as regards to religion was generally one of incorporation, as other lands were taken into the Empire, the local gods of the newly conquered area were simply added to the Roman Pantheon and given Roman names. Foster (1972) notes, "...They

reverence the conquered gods, seek out the religions of foreigners and make them their own” (p.67). So, for the Romans, religion was first and foremost a social activity that promoted unity and loyalty to the state; a religious attitude that the Romans called piety. To the Romans, the disappearance of piety in the society meant social unity and justice would perish.

One conquered nation (Jews), however, refused to allow the Romans any share in their religion. Christianity had begun with Judaism, and Christians, unlike Jews were being left to go their way, but Paul (Apostle to the Gentiles) made it clear that Christians were not a sect within Judaism. The Church was growing quickly, and the converts were nearly all gentiles. The Jews made complaints to the authorities against the Christians.

The Romans viewed Christianity not as another piety but as superstition - denoting negativity, as Christians were winning converts at the expense of the old religions. Persecution in the early Church (2005) argues, “the word superstition has a slightly different connotation than it has today for the Romans, it designated something foreign and different – in a negative sense” ((<http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/history/persecution.htm>). The Romans tolerated religious beliefs, which shown to be old in line with ancient customs; new and innovative teachings were regarded with distrust and Christianity was contrary to Roman toleration. Therefore, the Roman distaste for Christianity arose in a large part from its sense that it was not in line with ancient customs and that it was inappropriate for society. The Roman distaste for Christianity varied from its misunderstood nature of worship to its refusal of emperor worship. Lunn-Rockcliffe (2011) observes, “the early church dealt with many misperception probably resulting from grabbed accounts of the rites which Christians celebrated in necessary secrecy being the agape (love feast) and Eucharist (partaking of the body and blood of Christ)” ([www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/Christianityromanempire](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/Christianityromanempire)).

Boer (n.d.) corroborates these views when he argues: “...Because of this refusal, which in turn occasioned other refusals on the part of the Christians, they were hated, imprisoned, banished to lonely islands, condemned to work as slaves in the mines, cast to the lions as a public spectacle and executed by the sword. ...Christians were always in danger” (p.45). However, the Roman persecutions were generally sporadic, localized and dependent on the political climate and disposition of each emperor.

## **Persecution and Martyrdom during Emperor Nero**

### **I. Short Biography of Nero (His Accomplishments)**

Nero was born on 15 December 37AD to Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, who descended from a distinguished noble family, but was adopted by Emperor Claudius when he married his mother Agrippina. While in his teens, he succeeded Claudius. “Nero Biography” (2005) writes, “Nero’s mother Agrippina aided her son to ascend the throne by poisoning Claudius” (<http://infoplease.com/biography/var/nero.html>). However, due to his mad self-indulgence and whimsical cruelty, Nero killed his mother to consolidate his own power. Nero became Roman Emperor in 54AD. Foxe (2001) argues, “Nero was the sixth emperor of Rome and reigned for fifteen years. He was a paradox – a man of extraordinary creativity, combined with a vicious temper and extreme cruelty” (p.11). Though Nero was a tyrant, he led Rome to some level of prosperity though it was short lived. Austin (1983) observes, “Although decadent and ruthless, he began a reign of great prosperity and enterprise” (p. 61). González (2010) supports Austin’s view as he writes, “...he was a reasonable ruler, not entirely unpopular, whose laws in favor of the disposed were well received by the Roman populace” (p.43).

More so, Nero was the first emperor that started the first official persecutions of Christians. Though his persecution was local and short lived, it marked the first time the government distinguished Christians from the Jews. Sadly, after Nero, it became a crime to be a Christian. Hart (2011) writes,

“Nonetheless, it did establish in principle that the Christians could claim no legal protection for their practices and thus that the refusal of Christians to make proper offerings in honor of the emperor or the empire’s god could be treated as a criminal and seditious dereliction of civic duty” (p.35).

Nero died in 68AD after committing suicide. Austin (1983) again notes, “Increasing unpopularity, revolts throughout the empire and desertion by the Praetorians caused Nero to commit suicide in June” (p.61).

### **II. Causes of His Persecution against Christians**

In 64AD, a massive fire ravaged Rome, thousands were left homeless and Nero was suspected of causing the fire. Who wouldn’t for a wicked man who murdered his own mother? The easiest way for Nero to clear himself of this accusation, was to lay the blame on the Christians and punish them publicly and severely. Young in Foster (1972) writes, “Nero fixed the guilt on a class of people hated for their abominations who are commonly

called Christians... an immense number of Christians was arrested.” (69) More so, due to the Roman distaste for Christianity and Christians, Nero could not find a better group to fix the blame than the Christians. “Christian persecution” (2012) writes, that the fire and the subsequent building of Nero’s golden palace on the destroyed property were wildly unpopular. Many placed blame directly on Nero accusing him of intentionally lighting the fire in order to build his palace. Nero, seeking an unpopular scapegoat turned blame on the subversive Christians, playing on people’s fears that their intention was the complete destruction of the Roman world as they waited for the judgment day. ([www.unrv.com/culture/christian-persecution.php](http://www.unrv.com/culture/christian-persecution.php)).

As such, Christians were punished publicly and severely. Although Christians were hated for their position as atheists and claim of uniqueness, Nero did not carry out his persecution for religious reasons. Foster (1972) writes, “This first persecution did not spread beyond the city of Rome. It was not carried out for religious reasons but was to satisfy one man’s [Nero’s] cruelty” (p. 69).

### **III. Nature and characteristics of this persecution.**

The barbarous acts against the Christians were worse than any they had previously endured, especially those committed by Nero. Only a Satan-inspired imagination could have conceived them. Before killing the Christians, Nero used them to amuse the people in his gardens. González (2010) writes, “Some were dressed in furs to be killed by dogs while others were crucified” (p. 45). Foster observes, “The executions were turned into a cruel sport to amuse the crowds in the Emperor’s gardens. Christians were dressed in animal’s skins and hunted by the Emperor’s hounds” (p. 69). Foxe (2001) also describes the horrible and excruciating persecution thus: “shirts stiff with wax were put on others and they were then tied to poles in Nero’s garden and set on fire to provide light for his parties” (p.12). Traditionally, Nero was believed to be the Caesar in whose reign Paul and Peter suffered martyrdom. Foster (1972) explains, “...some were nailed to crosses – among them probably St Peter, ...St Paul who was in prison in Rome could not be crucified because he was a Roman citizen and so he was beheaded, this was during Nero’s reign” (p. 69).

### **IV. The effect of this persecution on Christians**

The cruel persecution spread throughout the Roman Empire. Christians everywhere felt insecure as they were put to death just because they were Christians. However, the persecution by the Emperor though it made Christians unsafe, it only strengthened them.

Foxe (2001) observes, “The cruel persecution only succeeded in strengthening the spirit of Christianity rather than killing it” (p. 12), and so Christianity grew in strength.

## **2. Persecution and Martyrdom during Emperors Galba, Otho and Vitellius.**

After Nero’s suicide in 68AD, the throne was empty as he had no heir to succeed him and so there was a struggle among the generals at that time. “Roman Empire: in the first century” (2012) writes, “following Nero’s death, Rome was plunged into chaos. Warring generals jostled for power. The senate named a successor - Galba” ([www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/galba.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/galba.html)). Unfortunately, three men that would lead Rome were in one year. They were Galba, Otho and Vitellius. However, this year, which is regarded as ‘the year of the four emperors’ came to an end when Vespasian became emperor.

### **I. Brief Biography of Emperor Galba and his Accomplishments.**

Born on December 24, 3BC as Servius Sulpicius Galba to patrician parents. Emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and Cladius all held him in great esteem, and so, he held successive offices as Governor of Aquitania, consul in 33AD, military commander in upper Germany, proconsul in Africa in 45AD where he began to show signs of cruelty in extreme punishments of small crimes. Suetonius in Hale (1993) writes, “he sentenced men of all ranks to death without trial on the scantiest of evidence and seldom granted applications for Roman citizenship”. ([www.mtjuliet.org/sermons/archives2/002811.html](http://www.mtjuliet.org/sermons/archives2/002811.html)). He was later appointed Governor of Hispania Tara Conensis in 60AD.

Galba became emperor in 65AD after Nero’s death, but he was quick to make enemies. “Emperor Galba” (2012) posits, “Galba aroused hatred with his greed and cruelty, particularly among the army” (<http://find.org.uk/romancoins/emperors/emperor/id/6>). He made a serious mistake by refusing to pay the praetorian guards the money promised for deserting Nero, and made matters worse by ignoring his faithful supporter Marcus Otho. Instead he named Lucius Piso as his successor in January 69AD. Sadly, Galba and Piso were murdered. “Roman Empire: in the first century” (2012) again observes, “Otho gained support of praetorian guards and Galba and Piso were assassinated” ([www.pbs.org/empires/roman/empire/galba.html](http://www.pbs.org/empires/roman/empire/galba.html)).

## II. Brief biography of Emperor Otho and his accomplishments.

Concerning the biography of Otho, Donahue (1999) narrates thus:

Marcus Salvias Otho was born at Ferentium in Southern Etruria on 28 April AD 32. Otho is recorded as being extravagant and wild as a youth - a favorite pastime involved roving about at night to snare drunkards in a blanket. Such behavior earned floggings from his father, whose frequent absences from home on imperial business suggest little in the way of a stabilizing parental influence in Otho's formative years (p.2).

These traits apparently persisted: Suetonius in Donahue (1999) records in his work "Otho (69AD)" in *An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors* that Otho and Nero became close friends because of the similarity of their characters; and Plutarch relates that the young man was so extravagant that he sometimes chided Nero about his meanness, and even outdid the emperor in reckless spending (p. 3).

Otho was a companion of Nero, perhaps even his lover, until in AD 58 they fell out over Otho's wife. At Galba's coup against Nero 10 years later, Otho was the first to declare his support. He subsequently won sympathy with the troops, showing concern for their hardships when on the march to Rome with them. Clearly Otho styled himself, at least in his own view, as a potential heir to Galba's throne. This was based no doubt on the fact that he had been the first to pledge his support to the emperor. Though Otho was to be deeply disappointed, when Galba chose Piso as his successor, instead Otho found other means by which to secure him the throne. It was therefore not difficult for Otho to involve the praetorian guards in a plot against Galba.

After the assassination of Galba, he became emperor in January 69AD. Hale (1993) argues, "...the senate appointed him [Otho] emperor trusting that he would let them mutually benefit from the Roman treasury" (<http://www.mtjuliet.org/ermons/archives2/002811.html>). While this was happening, the Roman army stationed at Germany hailed Quintus Vitellius as Emperor, and he marched toward Rome to claim the throne. Kramer (2005) writes, "less than a month after Vitellius arrival, the army at lower Germany saluted him as emperor" ([www.accla.org/actaacch/vitellius.html](http://www.accla.org/actaacch/vitellius.html)). However, several battles took place as Vitellius invaded Italy, Otho became convinced that he could not survive and so he committed suicide. "Marcus Salvius Otho" writes, "...as a result of his army being defeated by German/ regions in April, Otho killed himself" (<http://www.roman-empire.net/emperors/otho.html>). The paper writes further that when the news of defeat reached Otho at Brixellum the following day, the emperor Otho knew that he has been himself defeated. He advised his friends and family members to take what measures they could for their personal

safety, he retired to his room to sleep, and then stabbed himself to death at dawn the next day, 16 April AD 69 (<http://www.roman-empire.net/emperors/otho.html>).

Some have argued that Otho's suicide was committed in order to spare his country Italy from unnecessary civil war. On the other hand, as he had come to power, many Romans learned to respect Otho in his death. In fact, many could hardly believe that a renowned former party companion of Nero's had chosen such a gracious end. The soldiers were so impressed by Otho's final act of courage that some even threw themselves on the funeral pyre die with their emperor.

### **III. Brief biography of Emperor Vitellius and his Accomplishments.**

Vitellius was born on September 15CE to Lacijs Vitellius and Sextillia. He became acquainted with the imperial circle at an extremely young age; spending considerable time at the Caprean villa with the aged Emperor Tiberius. Kramer (2005) notes, “successive emperor appreciated his more notorious talents which varied from charioteer to dice. Nero admired both but was even more indebted to his skill as a flatterer” ([www.accla.org/vitellius.html](http://www.accla.org/vitellius.html)). Imperial favor led to public office. Achieving the consulship in 48CE became curator of public works and also served as temporary proconsul of North Africa. He was a member of the Arval brethren – an archaic order of priests charged with maintaining the fertility of plowed fields but equally known for its lavish feasts.

Emperor Galba made him the governor of lower Germany. Suetonius in Kramer (2005) argues, “The appointment was due not to his qualification but rather to lack of them” ([www.accla.org/actaccla/vitellius.html](http://www.accla.org/actaccla/vitellius.html)). Less than a month after his arrival, the surname Germanicus was pressed upon him by the lower and upper Germany soldiers. Having seven legions under him and the Roman troops in Gaul, Britain and Rhaetia also declared for him. He divided his forces, sending two columns marching towards Rome where he encountered and conquered the forces of Otho. With two emperors dead in Ten months, attention turned to Vitellius another professional politician. Vitellius became emperor of Rome after Otho committed suicide in April 19th 69AD. Kramer (2005) again observes, “...on April 19th, his remaining forces swore allegiance to Vitellus. The senate quickly followed suit,” ([www.accla.org/actaccla/vitellius.html](http://www.accla.org/actaccla/vitellius.html)).

Disgusted with Vitellius, Vespasian purposed to dethrone him. He sent one of his generals, Antonius to depose him. Hale (1993) writes that a terrible battle- one of the bloodiest in history was waged however; Antonius prevailed and finally entered Rome. Vitellius was found in hiding and dragged through the streets and killed.

**Persecution during Emperors Galba, Otho and Vitellius.**

Despite the Roman hatred for the church and Christianity as a whole, the short reign of these emperors did not account for any serious church persecution. Just writes, “there are no recorded persecution of the church during the reign of emperors Galba, Otho and Vitellius (<http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/History-persecution.htm>).

**Persecution and martyrdom during Emperor Vespasian brief biography and Accomplishments**

Born on November 17 AD9, he was consul in AD 51 and proconsul of Africa in AD63. Nero offered him a province and an army commander, a military command to settle the revolt in Judea in AD 66. He acquired military following and soon became Roman emperor.

Vespasian became emperor in AD 69 putting an end to the chaotic year of the four emperors. Historically, he is the founder of the second imperial dynasty in Rome – the Flavian Dynasty. When this short lived dynasty came to power, it put an end to the governmental turmoil that followed the end of the first imperial dynasty- the Julio Claudians.

Impressively, Vespasian started major building projects and other Rome improvement projects. “Vespasian” (2012) writes, “major building project like the colosseum were started by him, he raised revenue through taxation to finance them.” (<http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/g/Vespasian.htm>) Vespasian died in June AD 79 due to natural cause. There are no accounts of serious church persecutions during his reign. Schiff (1997) observes, “during the rapidly succeeding reign of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian and Titus, the church so far as we know suffered no very serious persecution”(7).

**Persecution and martyrdom under Emperor Titus, brief biography and accomplishments.**

Born on AD 30, he was the elder son of Roman Emperor Vespasian. Served as military tribune in Germany and Britain, served as supreme commander of the Jewish war during his father’s reign as emperor where he destroyed the temple of Jerusalem in AD 70.

He became emperor in July AD 79 soon after his twentieth birthday and ruled for 26 months. During his reign, he was loved. Baumheckel (2005) notes, “aside from his cruel prosecution of the war against the Jews, he was well loved in his career as emperor” ([www.accla.org//.html](http://www.accla.org//.html)). He went beyond building Rome and authorized generous gifts, he established a lenient government by discontinuing all prosecutions by *laesa majestas*



or treason by disrespect and decreeing heavy punishments against informers. However, he died of natural causes. Padfield (2012) writes, “Titus died suddenly on September 13, AD81 of natural causes and was deified after his death” ([www.padfield.com/2003/.html](http://www.padfield.com/2003/.html)). No serious church persecution was recorded during his reign apart from his destruction of the temple at Jerusalem in AD 70.

## **Persecution and Martyrdom during Emperor Domitian.**

### **I. Brief Biography and Accomplishments.**

Born on 24 October AD 51, he was the younger brother of Emperor Titus. He became emperor after Titus in AD 81 and at first paid vices; he set himself up as a reformer of morals and religion. González (2010) advocates, “it is a fact to restore them” (p. 46). He was the first of the emperors to deify himself during his life time by assuming the title of Lord and God. Foster (1972) writes, “...but the emperor Domitian made men call him “Lord and God,” the exact words which form the climax of the Fourth Gospel” (71).

During his reign, Domitian condemned such as were Christians. On one account or the other as Jews or atheists, the Christians were liable to punishment. Due to his tyranny, a conspiracy was formed and he was murdered in his palace. Scannell (2012) writes, “A conspiracy in which his wife joined was formed against him and he was murdered on 18 September AD 96” ([www.newadvent.org/cathen/051146.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/051146.htm))

### **II. Causes of Persecution:**

Christians, in their rejection of Roman gods and of many Roman traditions, stood in the way of Domitian and this caused persecution for them. The Jews, however, were not left out as Domitian regarded them as one with Christians. Austin (1983) notes, “...he declared a widespread persecution of Christians and Jews” (p. 62). Numerous lies were made up during this time to harm the Christians- such as Christians were responsible for every famine, epidemic or earthquake that afflicted any part of the Roman Empire.

### **III. Nature of Persecution.**

Domitian was a cruel person, and so in his hatred, he issued an order that no Christian, once brought before the tribunal should be exempted from punishment without renouncing his religion. When Christians were brought before Domitian’s council they were told to swear an oath of allegiance to him and if they refused, they were killed. Among those killed were Domitian’s cousins, Flavius Clemens and M’ Aciluis Glabrio, both consuls. He also banished

Domitilla for atheism. Austin (1983) notes, "Tradition holds it was during the Domitian persecutions that the Apostle John was banished to Patmos" (p. 62).

#### **IV. Effect of the persecution.**

Fortunately, when persecution broke out, Domitian's reign was coming to an end. His enemies killed him. After Domitian's fall, Christians were granted few years of relative peace. González (2010) concludes, "As for Christians, after Domitian's fall, no one seems to have taken notice of them and therefore, they were granted a few years of relative peace" (p. 48).

#### **Persecutions in Contemporary church**

One may think that with the advancement in human society, no one will persecute another because of his religious faith. This has been proven to be false as many religious adherents, the world over, face all manner of persecution. Worthy News (2010) writing on "Iraqi Christians Murdered, Hundreds More Flee" explains that "Hundreds of Iraqi Christian families are fleeing Iraq's capital Baghdad and the town of Mosul as murderers target families in their own homes and workplaces" (p. 1). Barnabas Fund in Worthy News (2010) notes that the latest group of refugees from Bagdad comes amid news that an elderly Christian couple and their daughter became the latest victims of what it called "the relentless campaign" against the country's Christian minority (p. 2). According to this report "Four gunmen reportedly raided the property in Baghdad and repeatedly shot them with silenced pistols. 'The victims, Hikmat and Samira Sammak like many Iraqi Christians had left the capital and gone to live in the north. Tragically, they had just returned briefly to Baghdad to finalize the sale of their home and furniture,'" (p. 3). The International Director of Barnabas Fund Dr Patrick Sookhedeo said that Christians in Iraq are facing the agonizing dilemma of either living in "constant fear" if they stay in their homes "or losing everything" if they leave (Worthy News, 2010: p.4).

Other incidences of persecution occurred in China according to Marshall Ramsey II of Worthy News (2010) where Chinese House Churches were raided and two pastors missing. The paper narrates that two incidences of persecution brought about pain and death to Chinese Christians. Ramsey II (2010) narrates:

In the first, which took place in Qu County, Da Prefecture, Sichuan province, the Youqing Church on Sept. 26 was raided by police. Objects of value to the church were broken, books were confiscated, and members of the congregation were arrested and taken to

the local police station. Family members of those arrested were requested to pay bail money to get the detainees out of jail.

In Sept. 29, 2010, four of the church members attempted to negotiate with Sichuan police in hopes of having the belongings that were confiscated returned to them. This was done in accordance to Chinese laws regarding places of worship. Instead of having the items returned to them, the members themselves were arrested. In Henan province, in the Wancheng District of Nanyang City, another house church was raided. All occupants of the church were arrested except for one elderly woman. Two foreign pastors, one from the United States and the other from Russia, both present at the time of the raid, were arrested along with their translator. Ma Hanzhong, a member of the house church and arrested with the others was beaten. The location of the two foreign pastors are unknown at this time (p.4).

Henan province officials according to Worthy News (2010) have threatened to sentence these detained believers to what they popularly call “re-education”. This is an attempt by the Chinese Police authorities to get these believers to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ through hard and terrible labor.

Many Christians in United States today are facing one form of persecution or the other. Persecution for their beliefs or witnessing for Christ in the U.S.A. is seen in such areas as the entertainment industry and syndicated media where Christians are increasingly being vilified. The form of persecution involves losing friends, being refused jobs, getting fired from jobs, a few church buildings being burned. This is in contrast to imprisonment, loss of life and limbs, as in other countries Worthy News (2010: p. 5).

In Nigeria, the level of persecution by religious sect called Boko Haram has reached unprecedented height especially in the Northern part of the country where it is presumed that Islam is the predominant religion. Crimi (2011) narrates that though Nigeria is constitutionally a secular state with freedom of religion; but the northern ruling elite give preferential treatment to Muslims and discriminate against Christians. Little or nothing has been done to stem the growth of violent Islamist groups or to stop persecution of Christians in the north, resulting in hundreds of churches burned and many Christians killed. Since 1999, Muslim state leaders have imposed Shariah law in 12 northern states and parts of four others. A careful study of the scenario in Nigeria shows that the scale of persecution of Christians by Muslims has accelerated in Nigeria’s northern states and as far south as the central plateau. It has caused the death of thousands, including pastors, and the destruction of hundreds, even thousands, of churches.

Crimi (2011) graphically presents the incidences of persecutions against Christians thus:

December 2010 was a particularly deadly month for Nigerian Christians. Fulani Muslims attacked a village in Plateau state, killing seven and injuring four. Christmas Eve attacks in and around Jos killed 31 and left more than 70 injured. In Borno State, a Baptist pastor and five other Christians were killed when militants set fire to a church and detonated bombs in front of it. In January 2010, an outbreak of riots in Jos left 300 dead. Ten churches were burned down. A similar night attack in Dogo Nahawa in March 2010 left more than 500 dead. (p.2)

Boko Haram's recent attacks on the Nigerian city of Damaturu could be seen as the latest and most deadly incident in the ongoing genocidal assault against Nigerian Christians. In its efforts to impose Sharia law throughout Nigeria, the Islamist terror group popularly called Boko Haram has systematically targeted Nigerian government officials, Christians and those Muslims who dare to publicly denigrate the terrorist organization. Their insurgents numbering over 200 recently descended on the northeastern Nigerian city of Damaturu and engaged in a raging four hour gun and bombing attack with Nigerian police, a battle that resulted in nearly 150 deaths and the destruction of churches, mosques and police stations. However, it could be seen from Damaturu, capital of the Nigerian state of Yobe, that the intent of the attack was specifically designed to target and kill Christian residents of the city. Of the nearly 150 people killed, at least 130 of them were seen to be Christian.

Release International (2012) explains that Idris Garba, chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in Yobe State, in condemning the attack on Christians said that the Boko Haram assault was a "direct attack against Christians. If you said you were a Christian, they killed you. They were selective. They attacked 11 churches. They did not attack any mosques" (p.3). This brutal assault has caused a near exodus of Christians from Damaturu, leaving Boko Haram to their trophy, the city as its new headquarters. More than 10,000 Christians have been killed since 1999 by religious motivated violence in Nigeria and nearly 1,000 homes and churches have been burned down by Muslim radicals - all because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Lessons from Persecution and Martyrdom in the Early Church**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century church is a luxurious church with freedom and no mass persecution. Any persecution is seen as awkward and in some instance could lead to severe retaliation by

Christians. In Nigeria for instance, the Christians have been seen retaliating against the Muslim extremist persecutors, contrary to the pattern of the Christians of the early church.

A careful study of the teachings of Jesus shows that today's Christians seem not to be interested in leaving vengeance for God any more. This could be because the believers in Christ today are very worldly and could not venture to die for their faith or they have lost sight of eternal reward in the presence of God "for fighting the good fight of faith and finishing their course" (II Tim 4: 6-10).

The early church knew what it means to be like Christ. They followed Christ's footsteps in all things. Jesus said, if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. In Acts 5:41 the apostles had been beaten for teaching in the temple. So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. Today, the pleasures and cares of this world do not allow Christians to rejoice in the midst of any kind of persecution. They will rather go to court to fight for their rights against their enemies or shoot to kill in the name of self defense.

In Philippians 3:10 Paul wrote that he wanted to share in the sufferings of Christ. "...that I may know Him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings..." One important fact about persecution is that God do not persecute his children. Persecution is satanic instrument through human beings to fight against the saints of God. This is why Paul explains in 2 Cor. 1:3-4 that when you are rejected or persecuted, God is always there, through the Holy Spirit, to comfort you. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation..."

Jesus specifically said, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, a man's enemies will be the members of his own house-hold" (Matthew 10:34-36). In Matthew 5: 44, He also said, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you"

When a Christian loses anything for the sake of Christ he will be in a position to receive much more than what he left behind. Jesus himself promises, "there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30). Matthew 5:44-45 But I tell you, love your enemies and

pray for those who persecute you (or hurt you), so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

## Conclusion

Ferguson (1987) stated that the Roman persecutions were generally sporadic, localized, and dependent on the political climate and disposition of each emperor. Moreover, imperial decrees against Christians were often directed against church property, the Scriptures, or clergy only. It has been estimated that more Christians have been martyred in the last 50 years than in the church's first 300 years (p.20). In presenting the dogged faith of the martyrs St Cyprian of Carthage said "This temporal and brief suffering, how shall it be exchanged for the reward of a bright and eternal honor!" (qtd in *Persecution in the Early Church*, 2005: p.6). In his *Dialogue with the Jew*, Justin Martyr explains "Though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but, the more such things happen, the more do others in larger numbers become faithful" (qtd in *Persecution in the Early Church*, 2005: p.7). In concluding this paper it is worthy of note that persecution in the early church did not destroy the church rather it strengthened it. They grew from strength to strength despite their persecution. Therefore, the 21<sup>st</sup> century church should return to that faith in Christ that made the early church not to falter in their faith but waxed strong despite opposition and death.

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